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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE OFFICE OF INTERNAL OVERSIGHT SERVICES

Note by the Secretary-General

1. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 48/218 B of 29 July 1994, the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit, for the attention of the General Assembly, the attached report, conveyed to him by the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services, on the management audit of electronic mail at the United Nations Secretariat.

2. The Secretary-General agrees that attention should be given to the management of electronic mail, with a view to maximizing its contribution to greater efficiency and economies within the Organization. He considers that the recommendations contained in the report should be pursued in the overall context of ongoing efforts at managerial improvements and reform. The efficiency and budgetary reviews currently under way provide a suitable framework for further assessing and pursuing the implementation, within existing financial constraints, of the recommendations in the report.

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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the management audit of electronic mail at the United Nations Secretariat

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Electronic mail (e-mail) has since its inception in 1993 been used to improve both horizontal and vertical communications throughout the United Nations system. Its use and acceptance has grown and today it is an essential form of communication for management and staff at the Secretariat, at regional commissions and throughout the major peace-keeping missions. Together with the Internet Superhighway, electronic mail reaches beyond the United Nations family to government missions, outside agencies and the millions of companies and individual subscribers throughout the world. With such heavy reliance placed on e-mail services, the system's availability, reliability and timeliness have become critical.

2. These three objectives have been addressed by the Infrastructure and Applications Support Section of the Electronic Services Division, but their view is appropriately limited to technology performance. Other objectives achievable through use of the system are outside their span of control. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, however, with its broader view of e-mail, sees it as a possible platform for exercising the skills and techniques of the new United Nations management culture. Since an attempt is being made to improve management skills drastically, utilizing this technology to complement wherever feasible the goal of changing management performance should be considered. In addition, it is an opportunity to be seized by the Organization to achieve economies, improve its efficiency and reach its goals.

3. One of the goals of the Organization, to improve and develop management skills, involves communications. Management could define specific objectives in the area of management communications that can be addressed through techniques and practices on e-mail. One could use it either to maintain a history of related correspondence, documenting the trail of responsibility and accountability established, or to keep staff informed of plans, objectives and accomplishments. The choices are numerous and while e-mail provides only part of the solution, it can be used to develop or reinforce the skills of the new management culture.

4. The Organization has invested heavily in computer hardware and software, yet there were no defined objectives for achieving economies through e-mail nor was overall responsibility for this objective established. No goal was apparent for e-mail to replace the more costly inter-office mail services such as pouch, cable and so on for items such as Security Council resolutions. There was no centralized effort to curtail expenses through a reduction in the use of paper. Part of the answer lies within the project development process at the point of project initiation. It is there that the project is justified and responsibility for objectives established.

5. Steps had been taken by the Infrastructure and Applications Support Section prior to the audit to enhance the reliability of the e-mail system, but a number

of areas remain where steps should have been taken to generate significant, long-term improvements. Guidelines for project management should be developed, project infrastructure procedures implemented and the mission managed more effectively.

6. The e-mail audit focused on management's practices related to its development and implementation. Procedural changes suggested and recommendations made apply not only to e-mail but also to most service-oriented projects and systems. It is expected that the recommendations made will be carried beyond the e-mail system.

7. The criteria for the audit evaluation were successful business and management practices utilized within the electronic systems industry. The mission objectives discussed are derived from either United Nations objectives or common industry goals.

8. The audit findings and recommendations were discussed with and reported to the Office of Conference and Support Services and, in most cases, management has already taken or planned corrective actions to resolve deficiencies. The present report contains a summary of the major findings, recommendations and response received.

II. AUDIT COMMENTS AND CLIENT REACTIONS

A. Mission statement recommended

9. A project mission statement ordinarily contains a set of project objectives based on top-level management goals. Furthermore, it defines the scope of the project and focuses activities on the benefits to be achieved. To promote reaching its goals, management ensures that measures of project success are established in conjunction with the mission and that responsibility for a successful implementation is defined. The absence of a comprehensive mission statement was noted, suggesting that improvements are needed in management procedures and in management planning and direction giving.

10. Objectives informally established were technical in nature, focusing on reliable and efficient e-mail service throughout the Organization. While appropriate from the technical view, this was inadequate for a user-oriented, global application and does not begin to harness the power of e-mail to change the culture and environment of the Organization.

B. Project management: a structure for developing the mission

11. The Office of Internal Oversight Services suggested, and the Office of Conference and Support Services concurred, that a more systematic approach to project management would provide the structure needed for ensuring the development of the mission and standards, while imposing management control on project activities.

12. Policy-making is another form of management direction needed to ensure that technology is utilized within the desired management framework and toward desired goals. It is now agreed to enhance the existing policy for the e-mail application, thereby providing a guide for management activities and operations.

C. Comprehensive mission objectives and performance measures recommended

13. Since a mission statement had not been developed, the Office of Internal Oversight Services, in its consultative capacity, offered mission objectives considered beneficial to the Organization. In addition to supplying Secretariat-wide access and a fully reliable system, it was felt that the e-mail system should provide confidentiality and timeliness of transmissions. Furthermore, utilization should be promoted and the system geared to achieve economies for the Organization, such as reductions in the use of pouch and the inter-office mail service. Objectives in the area of management communications should also be identified and implemented.

14. We would expect management to ensure that objectives are monitored, performance measures are developed, standards are utilized and measures of success are maintained and reported periodically to the responsible Director.

15. Monitoring mission objectives and compliance with policy requires measurements of success. This ability to monitor the achievement of objectives should be available either through the automated system or developed around the system so that management effectiveness can be enhanced through periodic evaluation of progress towards goals.

D. Mission management focuses project activities

16. The use of project management also encourages the selection of software with strong measurement capability and the development of a full measurement approach to achieving objectives. The selection guidelines, built into the project management process, provide management direction by formalizing the selection activities and increasing management's assurance that measurement of mission objectives is addressed. It has been agreed that a new version of the software with improved measurement capability will be implemented during 1996.

E. Proactive management oversight of objectives recommended

Reliability

17. We appreciate that the new software proposed by the Electronic Services Division will provide the ability to monitor reliability since the system was somewhat unreliable last year, reflecting poorly upon the Division's operations. This breakdown in reliability suggests a need for a more proactive approach to managing objectives whereby risks are anticipated, corrective action taken and monitoring planned and implemented.

18. Efforts to improve reliability have been evident within the Technological Innovations Services and the Infrastructure and Applications Support Section, but there is still room for improvement. Since there are a number of things that can affect the reliability objective, such as off-site storage of backup, we suggested that for each objective the risks be determined and techniques be evaluated for overcoming each risk. We suggested periodic reporting of the reliability of the system and the status of the control techniques to the Director of the Electronic Services Division and a technology steering committee, thereby promoting the achievement of objectives through improved management oversight.

Security

19. Given that this is a communications system utilized by management to discuss sensitive topics, security should also be considered an objective. Shortcomings were noted in the security environment and concern expressed that password control could be breached and messages intercepted and/or altered. It is also suggested that a strong project management environment would ensure that security standards are maintained. The Office of Conference and Support Services agrees with the recommendation, stating that they would review cc:mail security and would comply as much as feasible with the security standards set by the Electronic Services Division Security Chief.

Timeliness

20. Recognizing that timely transmission of messages is a significant benefit to be achieved from the use of e-mail, the Infrastructure and Applications Support Section has established transmission standards for local transmissions and offices away from Headquarters. Monitoring of the timeliness of transmissions is, however, very difficult to perform on the audited system since the system provides no history of transmission times and no easy way to gauge that the timeliness objective is being satisfied on a consistent basis.

F. Mission management of objectives recommended

21. Once mission objectives are determined, responsibility for their achievement should be coordinated for all those with individual responsibility for the mission's goals. Appropriate authority must be given to one person who would be responsible for managing the mission objective(s). This is especially important for those objectives which cross functional lines.

22. Currently, the Technological Innovations Services of the Electronic Services Division has responsibility for the reliability and timeliness objectives since these are strictly technical in nature. No other objectives have been identified as falling within their responsibility.

23. If, however, the project objectives are seen to include achieving economies, then the placement of responsibility within the Infrastructure and Applications Support Section would be inappropriate, since not all economies can be achieved through them. The Section has no authority over the economies to be achieved within, for example, th Mail Section nor even other areas within the

Electronic Services Division such as the Network Engineering and Planning Section, which can be seen as having some responsibility for communications economies.

24. If the mission goal includes increased productivity and utilization of the system, then part of the responsibility rests within the Electronic Services Division for reliable and timely services and part with the training service, which can promote achievement of objectives through its training activities.

25. The Office of Internal Oversight Services is concerned that objectives may not be achieved because responsibility is decentralized and disjointed among multiple functional areas. Where objectives cross functional areas, authority must be appropriately established to achieve the objectives. Furthermore, there is concern that economies would be lost and benefits only partially gained unless there is more coordination and focus on the objective rather than implementing technology as though it were an end in itself.

26. The Office of Internal Oversight Services will continue to pursue at higher levels within the Organization the establishment of overall responsibility for e-mail and the management of objectives.

III. CLOSING COMMENTS

27. The Office of Conference and Support Services and the Electronic Services Division are commended for their timely response to the audit report and the level of cooperation extended to the Office of Internal Oversight Services throughout the assignment. Most recommendations developed by the Office were accepted and implementation promptly initiated.

28. The Office will continue to monitor the progress throughout the year since the principles and procedures agreed to herein are key issues to the ongoing success of e-mail and will be the foundation for many other activities within the Electronic Services Division.